

**Rhode Island Department of Education
and
Coventry Public Schools**

Face-to-Face Meeting Report and Agreement

April 3, 2002

Overview

A "Face-to-Face" meeting between the Coventry school district and the Rhode Island Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (RIDE) occurred on April 3, 2002. The meeting was scheduled as a result of RIDE identifying Coventry High School as "low performing," based upon four years of student assessment data. The "Face-to-Face" meeting is the first step in the ongoing process of accountability for school improvement entitled Progressive Support and Intervention. It is designed to allow the school district to address its capacity to engage in the four core processes of school improvement: self-study, planning, implementation, and evaluation. The meeting report is a public recitation of the steps to be taken in the district to increase student achievement in English language arts (ELA) and mathematics over the ensuing year.

School: Coventry High School

Attending from Coventry: Robert J. Gerardi, Superintendent; Mary Kelley, Assistant Superintendent; Kay Wood, Director of School Programs; Kathleen Miner, Director of Professional Development; Virginia Schuttert, Director of Special Services; James A. DiPrete, Interim Principal, Coventry High School; James Erniakes, Mathematics Department Chair, Coventry High School (CHS); Judith Baxter, English language arts Department Chair, CHS; Kelly Seastrunk, School Improvement Team (SIT/CHS); Kathy Patenaude, Coventry PTA Council; William Berger and John Casey, Coventry Teachers' Association (CTA).

RIDE Staff: David V. Abbott, Interim Assistant Commissioner; Faith Fogle, Carol Reppucci and Lynn Perrault, Office of Instruction; Catherine Schulbaum and Kim Carson, Office of Special Needs; Dr. Ellen Hedlund, Office of Assessment; Linda Jzyk and Diana Crowley, Office of Research, High School Reform, and Adult Education; Colleen Callahan and Rick Richards, RI Skills Commission.

RIDE Welcome and Meeting Orientation

Interim Assistant Commissioner David V. Abbott welcomed the group and gave an overview of the process and objectives of the meeting. Each meeting follows a similar format. The school district is asked to begin with a presentation on the status of school and district efforts to improve student achievement in English language arts (ELA) and

mathematics. School officials are also asked to comment on the impact of having been categorized as "low performing." RIDE staff then responds to the school district's presentation, and adds comments based upon data analyses performed prior to the meeting. District and school officials next describe future plans to add or modify action plans to improve teaching and learning, and identify existing or prospective barriers to implementation. The meeting is designed to conclude with shared expectations of the respective roles of the school, school district, and RIDE in supporting ongoing school improvement efforts. Commissioner Abbott further noted that the meeting would result in a report to be made public at an upcoming meeting of the Coventry School Committee.

School District Presentation

Coventry representatives were given the opportunity to respond to the school performance category designation as it applies to their district. Robert Gerardi, Superintendent of Coventry Schools, delivered brief introductory remarks, noting that Coventry High School was designated as low performing by only one percentage point. Dr. Gerardi also explained that the head of Coventry's School Committee was away attending a conference. Assistant Superintendent Kelley referred to the variety of strategies currently being used to improve teaching and learning in Coventry schools, and acknowledged a strong emphasis on elementary literacy and numeracy.

Assistant Commissioner Abbott inquired about Coventry's efforts to develop an infrastructure to oversee school improvement efforts, and asked who was responsible for school improvement efforts at the district level. Assistant Superintendent Mary Kelley called such efforts a "work in progress," and described a collaborative working relationship with Kay Wood and Kathleen Miner. The efforts are designed to integrate curriculum, instruction, and professional development efforts in concert with the district's strategic plan and the site-based processes connected to school improvement plans. Assistant Superintendent Kelley further remarked that she performs a qualitative review of each school improvement plan.

Coventry High School Presentation

Interim CHS Principal James DiPrete painted an optimistic picture of Coventry High School. He praised the work of the leadership team, which consists of the academic department heads working in a distributive leadership model that goes far beyond the traditional "bean counting/textbook distributing" role. Mr. DiPrete observed that the work of the leadership team had allowed the school to engage in meaningful reform work, despite the current interim situation. Mr. DiPrete stated that he expects to see continued gains in student achievement, and that the entire faculty is committed to "doing much better next time around."

Interim Principal DiPrete enumerated the actions taken to reduce the number of students who did not take the state tests:

- Use of faculty team structure in grades 9 and 10;

- Institution of rewards system;
- Cessation of test administration in large room environments;
- Improved coverage for special needs students; and
- Provision of breakfast to all students being tested.

CHS administration/faculty communication is encouraged by the periodic attendance of the CHS assistant principals at leadership meetings, but the school improvement team chair's role on the leadership team is unclear. A meeting is scheduled for April 24, 2002, to review four of the six school improvement plan goals.

While it was acknowledged that the delivery of special education services within CHS is an area needing improvement, it was agreed that the hiring of a special education department head signified a step in the right direction.

Mathematics department chair Jim Erinakes and ELA chair Judith Baxter described a wide range of structural and reform efforts centered on the following core issues:

- Block scheduling - a formal study group is to be formed to decide over a 3-year trial period whether to maintain a block schedule;
- Student placement;
- Student in-class support;
- Parent outreach;
- Special education vs. academic tracking;
- Large size of school vs. personalization; and
- Teacher Support Teams (TSTs).

Mr. Erinakes explained that the mathematics department has taken a series of steps to realign course sequencing to ensure that students are not being tested in areas they have yet to study in class. The Math Department has set a series of goals for itself based on SALT protocols. Mr. Erinakes described efforts taken to modify the newly aligned curriculum to ensure that all levels are working on the same standards, including students with special needs.

Judith Baxter stated that the Leadership Team has collaborated on efforts to align curricula to standards, K to 12. Ms. Baxter discussed strategies being used to address writing proficiency, including the development of a protocol for examining rubrics. Assistant Superintendent Kelley noted the use of a heavily researched model, based upon the work of Elmore and Drucker (business) which emphasizes the strengths of the individual. Coventry has also adopted more vigorous graduation requirements, including the need for four credits in both ELA and mathematics, and an increase to 24 total credits required for graduation.

William Berger, President of the Coventry Teachers Association (CTA) gave a brief overview of Coventry's professional development efforts since 1996. Teachers have accepted a longer school day and year to accommodate block scheduling, and moved to a model of reform-oriented professional development. Judith Baxter noted that

professional development is increasingly centered on alignment of curriculum to standards, delivered via Course One and the RI Skills Commission.

Rising standards and graduation requirements profoundly impact the 25% of CHS students identified with special needs. Seventy-five of the high school's parents attended a forum on such issues. Strengthening personalization within the CHS building as a means of improving academic achievement was also examined. The alignment of the curriculum to standards with common rubrics resulted in the creation of virtual IEPs (Individual Education Plans) for students. An alternative means of assessment has been adopted in math.

Ms. Baxter detailed alternative learning programs, such as the Fresh Start Program for students struggling with the regular school day. Fresh Start is comprised of 11-12 students, including young mothers who have been out of school. Features of this re-entry program that have contributed to a good attendance rate include its flexible schedule, licensed social worker, and student transportation for school-phobic students. "Credit Recovery" is another program designed to assist students in need of earning additional credit hours by providing individualized tutoring beyond the school day.

One hundred 9th graders are participating in the newly created NCEE New Standards *After-School Literacy Ramp-Up Program*, run by two specially trained teachers. While too soon to generate student data, teachers have observed increased reading confidence among participating students.

Rick Richards, who serves on the RI Skills Commission, noted that Coventry has been a lead district in both the development of the CIM (Certificate of Initial Mastery) and in implementing the America's Choice model. The high school has participated in task development since the beginning of the process four years ago, and has a number of capable developers in both ELA and mathematics. The school's number of capable scorers is large, and it has the ability to run a credible assessment process based on portfolios. Coventry is the only district on the verge of wholesale commitment to getting every student to the CIM level, and has seriously engaged in the structural work needed to realize that goal.

RIDE Analysis

The inter-disciplinary team from RIDE made a series of observations based on its review of planning documents, assessment data, SALT survey results and visits, Office of Special Needs' School Support visit report, NEASC information, direct observation and discussion within this meeting.

- Test results for CHS indicate that 36% of its students are performing at the lowest levels of achievement over a three-year period.
- The Math Concepts and Math Problem-Solving subtests show the lowest levels of current performance, with less than 25% of the students performing to

standard in the most recent two-year period.

- In Mathematics Skills, 4% of the students moved out of the low performing level and 4% moved into the high performing level. In Math problem-solving 20% moved out of the low performing level and 14% moved into the high performing level. The data shows that 50.5% of the students are in the high performing category for Math Skills, but only 22.8% in Concepts and 24.4% in Problem-Solving.
- This school shows improvement in English Language Arts. High and low targets were met in Basic Reading - from 23.56 to 44.59 in the high performing level, and from 32.60 to 20.62 in the low performing level. Reading A & I showed the most improvement, meeting both high and low targets - from 10.14 to 39.52 in the high performing level, and from 56.99 to 27.42 in the low performing level. High and low targets were also met in Writing Effectiveness - from 9.32 to 33.87 in the high performing level, and from 31.23 to 19.47 in the low performing level.
- Although the high range target was not met in Writing Conventions, this area shows the strongest performance in high performing levels - 62.9% and the lowest percentage in the low performing level - 13.59.
- Despite the significant gains in Writing Conventions, the high range target was not met in RI Writing. There are 37.5% in the high performing level, and 26.09% in the low performing level.
- In both the Math and ELA tests, there were slightly more than 11% of the students in the "No Scores" category. In Math, over the 4-year period, the number of students not taking the test went from 65 to 39 to 21, then back up to 60. In ELA, over the 3-year period from 1999-2001, the number of students not taking the test went from 59 to 37, then back up to 50.
- Due in part to a strong commitment to national certification, Coventry's faculty represents its strongest potential resource in terms of professional development and evaluation of school improvement implementation efforts.

RIDE/District Agreement

The following immediate strategies were identified to improve Coventry school district's low performing school:

- Coventry school district will provide and strongly encourage all faculty, administrative and guidance staff to participate in ongoing professional development activity, e.g., Course One, that is focused on:
 - standards-based instruction;
 - examination of student work;

- alignment of C - I - A (curriculum, instruction, and assessment); and
 - NCEE New Standards (Math, ELA and applied learning).
- CHS will continue its emphasis on personalization initiatives to minimize the adverse impact of large size of facility, including teaming, advisor programs, specific professional development, and a stronger role for Teacher Support Teams.
 - The School Improvement Team will examine the role of the Guidance Department in supporting student personalization efforts, as well as programmatic and instructional reforms.
 - There will be an increased commitment to the CHS School Improvement Team, with a specific emphasis on increasing parent involvement.
 - The School Improvement Plan will address ongoing data collection and analysis to ensure that reform efforts are designed to meet current needs.
 - While the Leadership Team is a valid and necessary distributive leadership model, administrative turnover raises significant concerns about the need for transition planning and support. Strategic planning at the district level must address ways in which the central office can provide stronger support of the many existing school improvement initiatives.
 - Increased academic demands, the high percentage of students served by IEPs, and the size of CHS combine to create an increasing number of students “at risk” of failure. There needs to be an increased emphasis on meeting the needs of these students. Creating a SPED department chair is a step in the right direction.
 - Central office will support an effort to examine articulation of curricula and programming between the middle school and the high school.
 - Central office will create and maintain infrastructure and responsibility to support ongoing school improvement efforts, assist in transitions between administrations, and maintain compliance with legal mandates related to certification and accountability for student achievement.